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ABSTRACT

To investigate the development of children's concepts of marriage and the family, 43 preschool children were interviewed and their parents were asked to complete a questionnaire. Interviews were structured to determine whether the children had formed an appropriate gender identification, whether they had androgynous or traditional sex-role scripts, whether they wished to be parents someday, whether or not they had a script for families that recognizes the roles and relationships of family members, and whether they preferred nuclear or single-parent families. (The term "scripts" in this study refers to the complex organization of beliefs and values that helps individuals make sense of the society around them.) Parent questionnaires assessed such characteristics as family structure, parental sex roles, educational background, housing, religion, and family television-viewing patterns. The majority of parents questioned were white, middle-class, college-educated mothers living in suburban neighborhoods. Most lived within nuclear families in single-family homes and had been married once. About two-thirds of the mothers were employed outside the home. Results are discussed. (RH)

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THE MARRIAGE AND FAMILY SCRIPTS OF YOUNG CHILDREN

by

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> Karen (age 3) knots an apron around her waist as she hobbles in high-heels after Jenny (age 3). "Let's play house," Karen says. "I'll be the Mommy and you be the Daddy." Jenny protests, as she ties another apron around her waist, "We don't have a Daddy. I'll be the Grandma."

Family structure, roles, and habits vary from household to household. To the young child, his/her own family may seem typical. A child's conceptualizations of the family can be viewed as components of "social scripts" for marriage and the family. A social script is a complex organization of beliefs and values, which are internalized by the child through a process of reinforcement, modeling, rehearsal, and cognitive assimilation (Weis, 1979).

Most theories of socialization emphasize the importance of early childhood as a period of learning and acquiring the habits and customs of a culture. Although theories may vary a great deal, they all maintain that adult patterns of behavior and value systems (scripts) are at least partly a result of developmental processes occurring in childhood (Maccoby, 1980; Mussen, et al., 1974; Nye and Berardo, 1966). It is commonly believed that many observable patterns of family interaction are socialized during childhood.

In a study by Gilby and Pederson (1981) of a group of kindergarten and elementary school children, it was found that most of the children (87%) conceptualize the family as a nuclear group. These children saw a typical family as consisting of two parents and their three children, one of which was often a baby. There was generally at least one child of each sex included. While the kindergarteners tended to see persons who live together or have regular interpersonal contact as constituting a family, the fourth graders defined family membership in terms of legal or blood relationships.

This study by Gilby and Pederson is one of the few dealing with young children's concepts (scripts) of the family. There has been no research dealing with the process by which children develop scripts for marriage and the family nor with the developmental stages of the child, especially the preschooler, in this process. We do not know what factors influence this process or

what types of scripts are developed by age five. This information would greatly benefit caregivers, parents, and early childhood educators to help children make sense of the world around them while they are actually trying to do just that. With the tremendous increases in divorce, single-parent homes, and working mothers, different scripts are likely to develop. These changes in our society may affect the scripting process of children and may eventually influence their adult patterns of behavior in marriage and the family.

To learn more about the scripting process for marriage and the family and the developmental stages of children in this process, we interviewed 43 children, age 3-5, at a suburban New Jersey day-care center and asked their parents to complete questionnaires. The interviews with the children were structured to determine whether the children had formed an appropriate gender identification, whether they had androgynous or traditional sex role scripts, whether they wished to be parents some day, whether or not they had a script for families that recognizes the roles and relationships of family members, and whether they preferred nuclear family types or single-parent types. The parental questionnaires assessed such characteristics as family structure, parental sex roles, educational background, housing, religion, and family television-viewing patterns. We believe that this has been the first study to compare the perceptions of parents and their children on these issues.

The majority of parents questioned were white, middle-class, college-educated mothers living in suburban neighborhoods. Most live with their nuclear families in single family homes and have only been married once. About two-thirds of the mothers were employed outside the home.

Gender Identification

All but one child in this study was able to correctly identify his or her gender, but one-half of the children had no idea why they were a boy or girl. Other children referred to symbols such as long hair, skirts, and flower prints on clothing for girls or hair and beards for boys. Children were more likely to cite this type of symbol if their fathers had professional occupations. This suggests that parents play an important role in their children's development of scripts for gender identity

(how to tell a male from a female). None of the children, though, referred to anatomical or physiological differences between the sexes as a reason why they were male or female. Parents and teachers could help children by encouraging them to observe each other (Koblinsky, Atkinson and Davis, 1980) and by answering honestly children's questions about male and female differences.

Sex Roles

Most of the children (about 75%) interviewed indicated a preference for the traditional masculine and feminine sex roles. While only a slight majority said that women should dry dishes, nearly all the children felt that women should definitely cook dinner. Buying food, making beds, and doing laundry were also seen as predominantly women's jobs, but emptying garbage and mowing the lawn were believed by most children to be men's chores. Fewer than 10% of the children reversed these traditional roles. If they did not ascribe these chores to the traditional gender, they thought both sexes could perform the task. These responses did closely match the actual household division of labor by the children's parents.

Siblings Influence the Scripting Process for Sex Roles. Children were most likely to have non-stereotypic or egalitarian scripts for sex roles if there were few or no brothers and sisters, or if they were the first-born child. This may suggest that siblings contribute to the formation of these scripts. For instance, one mother mentioned that her four children often played house together. The eldest boy and girl were always the father and mother, and the younger two were their children. The "father" yelled at the little boy if he played with a doll or other girl's toys, and the "mother" insisted her daughter play in girl's activities. These children were teaching each other the sex roles of men and women, including many of the stereotypes they have observed. A child without brothers or sisters, though, may not have this sibling pressure to follow traditional sex roles.

Income Affects Sex Role Scripts. Children were apt to have egalitarian scripts for sex roles if their families had a high income. This may suggest that, because many people with high incomes also have a high level of education, they are more aware of the current employment

opportunities for both sexes and may try to encourage both sons and daughters to perform to their potential, regardless of sex. It is also possible that parents of high income families are simply more likely to follow egalitarian patterns in their division of household labor.

Limited TV Viewing May Encourage Non-Stereotyped Sex Role Scripts. It was also found that children who watch little television have scripts which are similar for male and female sex roles. This suggests that television viewing affects the scripting process in young children for sex roles, perhaps because many shows portray characters with stereotypic sex roles. The less exposure a child has to these stereotypes, the less they will affect scripts for sex roles. Limiting a child's viewing to one to two hours a day may well be appropriate for parents who wish to encourage the development of androgynous scripts.

Select a Few Shows from Which Your Child May Choose. It was found that children who select what they wish to watch on TV form more egalitarian sex role scripts than children who have no choice. Parents may inadvertently select TV programs which show traditional sex roles for their children to watch. Parents may feel these shows are less violent than other shows and that these may set a good example for their children. Because of the varied programs available on television, parents have difficult choices to make when it comes to what their children should view, but children can help decide. One possible strategy would be to pre-select several shows from which the child may choose which he or she would like to watch. This can also help the child feel important because he or she is helping in this decision-making process.

Parents' Roles in Families Affect the Sex Role Scripts Their Children Develop. We found that children develop scripts for androgynous sex roles if parents follow an egalitarian division of labor. For instance, the parents of one child both work, and they divided the household chores evenly. They alternated making dinner and washed dishes together. Fixing beds, taking out the garbage, painting, wallpapering the apartment, and shopping for groceries were all done by both parents, often together. Their children indicated a distinct preference for androgynous roles. On the other hand, parents who divide chores according to the dictates of traditional sex role

stereotypes will teach their children the scripts for these roles because the children learn from their models. Parents may wish to discuss the division of labor in the household and its implications on the scripts children will develop as a result.

Marriage and Family Script Development

Many Preschoolers Have Difficulties Defining a Family. Four of the 42 children in the survey (10%) suggested that a family is "a bunch of people living together," and four children (10%) tried to define a family in terms of the roles of the members. However, the vast majority of the children (80%) could not describe what a family is. It seems clear that very few children have developed a script that recognizes family roles and relationships by the age of five.

Children were more likely to have a concept of family roles and relationships if their parents had been married only once and for a long time. This strongly suggests that the formation of scripts for marriage and the family is a gradual process because of the vagueness of these institutions. It may take several years for a child to form these scripts based on his experiences within the family. If the structure of a family were to change, a partially formed script of a preschooler may no longer apply to his or her new situation. As children enter school, they interact with people from other types of families and have the opportunity to compare families with other social institutions. Scripts for the family will likely change at this time.

Another possible explanation of why young children may have difficulties defining a family is that they may not yet possess the vocabulary which would help them describe what they know. However, children as young as three years old are already forming their scripts for marriage and the family.

Preschoolers Prefer Certain Family Structures. During the interview, each child was shown five pictures of various family structures and asked to pick which they liked the most and least. Thirty of the 42 children (70%) selected the pictures of the typical nuclear family with a mother, father, and two or three children as the family they liked most. Thirty of the children also selected couples without children or single-parent families as the family they liked the least.

Children were more likely to select nuclear families as nicest if their parents had been married a long time and if they lived in single-family homes. Similarly, children were more likely to choose a single-parent home as worst if their parents were currently married, if their mother was not employed outside the home, and if no other adults such as aunts, uncles, grandparents, or friends were living in the family home. Children simply liked families which had structures similar to their own homes (those with which they were familiar) and disliked families which were different. Since few of these children (15%) live in single-parent families, the preference for traditional nuclear families among the children in this study again shows the importance of models.

Children Need Exposure to a Variety of Families. Because of the variety of family life styles and structures, many children at one time or another will be part of families which do not fit into the "typical" family script -- having a homemaking mother, a working father, and two or three children. Parents need to discuss various family structures and lifestyles with their children when they see them on TV or meet other people with families different from their own. Caution should be taken, though, to give children positive information so that they are not greatly biased against certain lifestyles.

Preschool teachers may wish to encourage class and small group discussions among the children about their families. Each child could draw a picture of their entire family, and the pictures can be used for a class bulletin board. Children enjoy talking about their families, and this is an excellent way for them to discover how many types of families there actually are.

Many Children Are Forming Positive Scripts for Marriage, Families, and Parenting. All but four of the 42 children (90%) questioned wanted to be a parent themselves someday, and they were more likely to wish to be a parent if their parents had been married a long time. This indicates that many children are receiving positive information about families and parenting from their parents. Most of these children are forming positive scripts for marriage and family. Children were also more likely to wish to be a parent someday if their mothers had jobs outside the home, which may suggest that many working mothers are content with their dual roles. Children are likely to sense parental contentment and internalize it into their scripts.

Conclusion

Social scripts, which are complex organizations of beliefs and values, help people make sense of the society around them. Children begin to develop scripts for their gender, sex roles, marriage, parenting, and families before they are three simply by observing and modeling family members, rehearsing what they learn, classifying and then storing this information for their use throughout life. Scripts are by no means complete when a child enters school. The child will constantly be assimilating new information with different situations that arise throughout life.

Although many preschoolers cannot define what a family is, their scripts for marriage and the family are developed enough for them to prefer one family structure over another. In general, children seem to be building scripts which are favorable for the institutions of marriage and family, and many children do want to be parents themselves someday.

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